



A Story for the Shabbos Table

סיפורי הבעל שם טוב

THE BAAL SHEM TOV SAVED ALEINU LESHABEIACH

In the year 5519 (1759), our master the Baal Shem Tov ז"ל sent one of his young talmidim, R. Moshe Meshel from the village of Bezenke, with two letters. One was to be delivered to another of his Talmidim, a great Talmid Chochom called R. Chaim Rapaport, ז"ל, and the second was to a certain Reb Chaim Yisrael who lived in Lvov.

This is how R. Moshe Meshel from the village of Bezenke later told the story.

At midday on Thursday I arrived at Lvov, and found the room of the Bais Din of R. Chaim. It was filled with people, and Reb Chaim was busy with an important meeting with the elders of the community.

When I asked one of the Dayonim, R. Moshe Yosef Yisrael, to allow me to meet him he asked me in surprise: "Don't you know about the terrible decree that the Deputy Archbishop Mikolski has just published? In the course of the coming week, until next Thursday, they will tear out *Aleinu LeShabeiach* from all the Siddurim, and from this Sunday we will not be allowed to say this Tefila in any Shul! Right now they are discussing what can be done."

Realizing that I would not be able to see R. Chaim, I went off to fulfill my second mission -- to deliver the letter from the Baal Shem Tov to R. Chaim Yisrael the Potter. By the time I returned to the Bais Din, R. Chaim had gone home, so I handed him his letter there.

Seeing the envelope he stood up, and when he heard that I had been sent to him by the Baal Shem Tov his holy face lit up and he read the letter with great respect. Finally, he sighed and said: "The entire Jewish community of Lvov and its surrounding villages needs Hashem's mercies, because of (*Chas VeSholom!*) the dreadful decree that *Aleinu LeShabeiach* should no longer be recited in our Shuls."

The Rov did not say a word about the letter that he had received. The members of his household and the students of his *yeshivah*, however, seeing that R. Chaim was in high spirits, realized that the visitor was no doubt a Shliach who had brought word, orally or in writing, from the Baal Shem Tov. They recalled that whenever an oral message reached him from the Baal Shem Tov, and even more so, whenever a written message reached him, he treated that day as a *Yom-Tov*: he did not say Tachanun, and he held a festive meal, a *seudas mitzvah*. Sometimes he shared with them the content of his message

and sometimes he withheld it, but in the course of his Torah teachings at the table he always explained the spiritual path of the Baal Shem Tov.

On this occasion, too, R. Chaim arranged for a festive meal to be prepared. In no time word of this reached his associates and disciples. All the elders and worthies of the community also arrived, as well as many members of the public, for all the townsmen were deeply distressed by the decree. In the middle of the festive meal the decision of the earlier meeting was announced: they would ignore the decree. At the risk of their lives, the whole community would recite *Aleinu LeShabeiach* three times every day exactly as in the past. The coming Sunday was declared a public fast, and the *Shofar* would then be sounded.

On Friday morning R. Chaim Yisrael the Potter went to the Deputy Archbishop Mikolski and warned him that if he did not annul the decree he would be severely punished. Mikolski drove him out angrily. On Sunday morning, however, as he stepped down after giving his speech to the Goyim, he stumbled and broke his right leg and arm. He fainted from pain and was carried home. There, still suffering, he remembered that he had had a Jewish visitor on Friday. Not only that, but he recalled that he had seen that same Jew once before, in Kamenitz-Podolsk: this was the very Jew who had then warned the late Archbishop Demboski that if he did not annul his decree to burn the holy books of the Jews, he would die....

On the spot, Deputy Archbishop Mikolski ordered one of his senior priests to notify the local rabbi and his congregation that the decree was annulled: the Jews could continue to pray as they were accustomed to doing.

The good news spread through the city in a moment, and for the Jews of Lvov this was a time of light and joy. They quickly sent messengers throughout the neighboring villages, and the learned R. Chaim gave out orders: The townsmen were to complete the daylong fast; at nightfall, in time for the *Maariv* prayers, they should light many candles in all the Shuls as they usually did for *Yom-Tov*; the Davening should be sung to the festive melodies reserved for *Yom-Tov*; and *Aleinu LeShabeiach* was to be sung to the solemn melody handed down from the saintly Maharal of Prague, as on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, although on this occasion the people were not to bow down on the floor.

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